

Liège food belt, Belgium

Ceinture Aliment-Terre Liégeoise (CATL) is an association dedicated to promoting sustainable food amongst the general public and to fostering local food production and distribution in the Liège region, with a special focus on vegetable growers. It was launched by citizens in November 2013 with the support of the City of Liège. Here we talk to **Elisabeth Gruié**, communications officer with the CATL team and coordinator the annual Nourrir Liège (Feeding Liège) festival.

Who was/is involved?

CATL was created by inspired citizens from the transition movement - Liège en Transition - and several local non-profit organisations and cooperatives involved in short food supply chains and rural development. The idea was born in April 2012 during informal discussions among members of these organisations at a conference organised by students of the management school at the University of Liège.

CATL was officially launched 18 months later with producers, institutions and everyone interested in a sustainable food (there was no one from the agri-food industry!), from the general public to workers at the city council. They were invited to reflect together on a strategy for transforming the Liège food system towards relocation, decarbonisation and democratisation.

CATL is now an independent association with 5 employees.

What were your initial motivations? What inspired you?

We were motivated by the disappearance of a large number of farms and the loss of regional food sovereignty. We were inspired by the many alternative production and commercial initiatives that had been set up some ten years ago in the Liège region, many of them citizen-funded cooperatives, as well as the many consumers supporting local agriculture. We were also particularly inspired by the Transition Towns movement. Our motivation in launching CATL was to connect these initiatives and create a network to lead them to adopt a common strategy. We wanted to enable a change of scale to bring these short food supply chains out of the margins where they had been confined for too long.

What or who were you up against?

Agro-industries, supermarket distribution, junk food.

Name the three biggest challenges you had?

- 1. The Human Factor** was definitely the biggest challenge by far. We had difficulty finding people with appropriate skills. We also had the challenge of some very strong (and dysfunctional) personalities combined with people with very fragile personal situations, which is sometimes the case with emerging social economy projects.
- 2. The lack of long-term funding.** Even though the team managed to get through periods with very little (or no) financial resources, it was and is a cause for stress, and delays in completing some projects. Precious time is used in finding sources of finance and in paperwork justifying subsidies.
- 3. The necessity of finding our public.** Sustainable food is not a sexy issue. It's too low-tech. Having to raise citizens' awareness as well as political interest has been tough, especially when the agroindustry lobbies are so strong. The climate strikes have been a blessing and have proved quite exhilarating for us.

Who supported you? And how?

CATL has been funded intermittently by the Walloon region. There was a one-year gap when one of the founders had to work as a volunteer. Over the past 5 years it has been 90% subsidised by the regional authorities under a social economy program. The City of Liège is a first-rate partner and we work together on several large-scale projects. The ecosystem of alternative food associations in Liège is very strong and is a source of support too.

What have you achieved so far?

Now, in 2020, 20 citizen-led food cooperatives exist under the CATL banner. 16 have been created since CATL's official launch. They have been either directly set-up by the association or inspired by the model. These include the iconic Les Petits Producteurs (i.e. "The Small Producers"), four local and/or organic food shops within a co-operative, which aims to use its profits to support agricultural projects.

CREaFARM is a combined project, set-up by the City of Liège together with CATL. The City identifies and makes available suitable plots to promote urban agriculture, job creation and local agricultural production. CATL found and coached two young market gardeners who are also working part-time in the shop Les Petits Producteurs, helping them to make a reasonable leaving.

We co-created and now coordinate the Nourrir Liège Festival, with its 5th edition in May 2021. It has helped Liège stand out as a leading city for sustainable food in Europe. The festival is spread across 10 days, includes 150 partners and includes hundreds of mostly free activities ranging from workshops to large-scale conferences.

What's the number one thing that you have collectively learnt since you began?

Never despair. All things come to those who wait (and work together). CATL has a small team but with diverse and complementary skills and everyone works independently but in a participative manner. We join forces when needed and often by discussing, something that was not considered initially comes up, and we end-up with a great project.

What, if anything, has changed for your work since the pandemic?

Our third challenge – that of finding our public – is almost sorted. We have seen a surge in interest for local and healthy food, both from public authorities and from the general public.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

- See CATL's [homepage](#) (in French) for further information
- Read [Rob Hopkin's report](#) of the project back in 2018